

MAYFLOWER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
3901 NORTHWEST 63RD STREET
OKLAHOMA CITY, OK 73116
REV. DR. ROBIN R. MEYERS, SENIOR MINISTER
405-842-8897
cyasunday@mayflowerucc.org
www.mayflowerucc.org
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Luke

FLAMETHROWERS AND PROCRASTINATORS

What a wonderful set of images are here from the writer of Luke's gospel — the Greek is lyrical and the images unforgettable — “When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” Taken up? What does that mean? In that world of “verticality” in religion (God is up, the demons are down, we are caught in between) this undoubtedly refers to the ascension, the story of Jesus going back where he came from and leaving the disciples behind to fend for themselves.

The gospels are all written in the absence of Jesus. They are the stories formed from sacred memories scratched onto parchment so that we would not forget that Jesus had a face, eyes and ears and a nose, and a way of looking at you when you said something stupid, and another way of looking at you when you got it right, and now that he's gone, and that face is no longer before us, all we can do is remember the fateful moment when he turned his face toward Jerusalem.

That's where he would die of course, so wasn't that a mistake? I mean, if you knew you were going to die if you went somewhere wouldn't you not go there? If you were one of the disciples wouldn't you make a quick change to the itinerary — “Uh, Jesus, change of plans . . . there is an advisory against travel to Jerusalem that's just been issued . . . so we are rerouting you. And oh by the way, we've decided to take the long way around Samaria, to avoid contact with those Samaritan lowlifes who continue to believe, among other silly things, that they can worship God as well from their little temple as we can from our big Temple in Jerusalem.

Jesus, did you hear what we said? Change of plans. Jesus? But there is no response — just silence. Just the profile of his face, turned toward Jerusalem — like one of those profiles on Mt. Rushmore, cut in stone, fixed in one direction, silent.

I always imagine the back story, the disciples off to one side quarreling like handlers trying to protect him, trying to get the most out of this Roman Candle of a life, determined to blow up before the fourth of July. “You tell him not to go to Jerusalem . . . I don't think that's my job . .

. why don't you tell him? He listens to you. He doesn't listen to anybody. Look at him. Look at his face. Does he look open to discussing it?"

“Not really. Well, OK, do you think he would at least be open to avoiding Samaria? I don't think so. He told us to go ahead of him to prepare for the visit, so it doesn't sound to me like we are taking the by-pass. Oh, Lordy, why does he think he needs to go right down through the middle of everything? The Samaritans are going to reject him, mark my words—especially when they see that he is not stopping until he gets to the big Temple. That causes resentment you know. I can hear them now, “So Jesus, slumming it are you? Checking out how the other half lives?”

And sure enough, “they do not receive him because his face was set toward Jerusalem.” What they do not understand, because we still do not understand, is that to get to God one does not go around the enemy, one walks straight into the enemy camp. The journey toward God is a straight line right down through the middle of all the trouble.

I remember years ago when I planned a long road trip when my kids were little. Small enough that you could just throw them in the car and say, ‘Trust us, this will be fun.’ A 6,000 mile road trip and you're going to love every minute of it. And one day, as we approached San Francisco, my son Blue, looking at the map said, “Dad, it says the quickest way around the city is the by-pass — take 405.” And I said, but I thought we were going to San Francisco, not around it. Are you going to tell people that you have been to San Francisco when in fact all you did was go around it?”

“Well, OK, but we'll get lost and it will take time, and who knows where we will end up.” “That's true. We might end up in the North End,” I said, “at the Lovelight Bookstore, at a table on the sidewalk in some Italian restaurant instead of a Love's travel stop. There's more to travel than clean restrooms, you know.”

This text is about making up your mind and then trusting God to redeem the situation. Think of it this way. When the first freedom riders left our northern cities in the early days of the civil rights movement and headed south, trying to show the world that Jim Crow was wrong, that separate but equal was a myth, that segregation stinks in the nostrils of God — it would have been strange indeed for those protestors to avoid restaurants that served what were referred in those days as “colored folk.”

That is, what's with people who go on a mission to save somebody while studiously avoiding contact with those same some bodies? I was recently invited to attend a conference on poverty held in Santa Fe, New Mexico. We met at the La Fonda hotel, the venerable old hotel on the plaza in what has become a tourist Mecca for yuppies to study the plight of people who could never have afforded to check into the La Fonda! Don't get me wrong, I enjoyed it. But there's something slightly incongruous about it all – especially when it was the poor who moved

silently around us, cleaning our rooms at night, making our beds, emptying the trash, and leaving little chocolates on our pillows.

The Jews and the Samaritans did not get along, to say the least. And so what happens next in the text should not be difficult to understand. When Jesus is rejected by the very people he has not avoided on purpose, James and John are indignant. They snap, and ask Jesus if he'd like them to command fire to consume them and turn them all into little burnt Samaritan biscuits.

It's another moment when the disciples prove that they are not ready for prime time, and they still don't get it. It might seem obvious to us now, but apparently praying for the enemy and loving the enemy instead of zapping the enemy is a point too fine to be fully grasped by the inner circle. To put it in the vernacular, Jesus is saying we don't do vengeance. It is one of the most remarkable, countercultural, and anti-imperial characteristics of a follower of Jesus.

You can't blame the disciples. They'd read I Kings, chapter 1 where the great prophet Elijah was pursued by a captain and his small army of 50 pagans who ordered the "man of God" to come down from the top of a hill on which he was sitting and he said, "If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty." Then fire came down from heaven, and consumed him and his fifty.

Then the king sent another fifty, and the whole scene was repeated, and again fire came down and fried them all. By the time the third captain and the third group of fifty now somewhat apprehensive soldiers are sent out the captain is terrified. He begs Elijah not to sic this vengeful Yahweh on his men. I can't read this story and not think of the new Stephen Colbert segment called "It's Yahweh or No Way!"

I mean this is religion for the masses. This is a story that Hollywood could not resist. The special effects alone would be irresistible. Accept my God or else; pray to my deity or He'll turn you into toast. Either you're with us or you're with the soon to be incinerated terrorists. We'll bring you to justice, or we'll bring justice to you — that famous threat issued by George W. Bush after 9/11.

One moment, we're talking about Jesus being "taken UP" into heaven, and the next moment the disciples are talking about calling fire DOWN from heaven. So there is obviously some confusion about what heaven represents and what resources are available there. Is it a metaphor for eternity and a return to God, or is it a repository for weapons of mass destruction?

The apostle Paul tells us repeatedly that there are three essential characteristics of the followers of Jesus: hospitality, generosity, and no vengeance. Can you imagine a foreign policy based on these three? No president who suggested this could possibly be elected, much less survive the firestorm of criticism that would be leveled at him for being soft on everything. No vengeance? We have been in Afghanistan for nine years now, with no end in sight, to make someone pay for 9/11. Has it worked?

Perhaps this is why the text suddenly shifts from a lesson on how not to avoid one's enemy, and how hard it is to be a follower of Jesus. "As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." Maybe that sounds bit hollow to Jesus, since his own disciples have just disappointed him, but it always makes me think of a student in the 70's sitcom called Welcome Back Kotter, in which Gabe Kaplan plays a hip high school teacher trapped in a room full of quirky students who called themselves the sweat hogs. One of them was Arnold Horshack, who wheezed when he laughed like a hyena, but also had a habit of being comically over-eager and full of compliments for Mr. Kotter. He would always raise his hand when he thought he knew the answer, and go "ooh—ooh—ooooh!" The he would respond to anything the teacher said by saying, "That was very clever, Mr. Kotter."

I've had students like that. They are just full of it. Why are you in this class, I ask on day one. "Because you are teaching it, Dr. Meyers . . . To sit at the feet of great wisdom . . . Because I'm not just here to learn, but to be transformed!"

For some reason, my mind works this way, I thought of all the over-eager students in the world when someone said to Jesus and his disciples on the road, "ooh—ooh—ooooh, I'll follow you where you go." Maybe it sounded a little too good to be true, and so Jesus responds in a way that sounds strangely inhospitable: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Or to put it another way, "you want to follow a homeless man who is not long for this world?"

Then Jesus tries his hand at recruiting someone, picks someone out of the crowd who appears to have disciple potential, and he hesitates, saying, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." And then comes one of the strangest utterances by Jesus in the New Testament, that is, if you think of Jesus as a power-of-positive thinking superhero: "Let the dead bury their own dead." Is Jesus having a bad day?

Then another man volunteers, but offers his excuse as a precondition, "Lord, let me first say farewell to those at my house." That's sounds reasonable. We do this at my house. Every time one of our kids heads off we say, "Bye, I love you, be careful." What's wrong with that? And that's when Jesus, his very stern face set toward Jerusalem, says, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

I wonder sometimes if this isn't exactly what Jesus was thinking about doing, looking back, "unsettling" his face (turning it away from Jerusalem) that he too might live a long and happy life. Apparently, he was in no mood to facilitate the illusion, in himself or in those who might follow him, that becoming a disciple can be conditional. If you're in it will change everything, and not always in ways that are pleasant, popular, or even safe.

It has become my personal conviction (and I don't like this anymore than you will), that conditional discipleship hurts the church more than people who take it all so seriously that they

seem, as we say in Oklahoma, “peculiar.” But then, just imagine Jesus returning and appearing at the state legislature. Some good Christian would undoubtedly call security. “Homeless man on aisle six, babbling about the rights of brown people, women, children, says oil is new golden calf—needs to be removed and not allowed to re-enter (appears mentally disturbed).” Remember Mark 3:21: When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “he has gone out of mind.”

I think there will be no renewal of the church until that charge is leveled against us again. No vengeance. Have you gone out of your mind? You are buying an electric car to help stop the oil spill? Have you gone out of your mind? You have decided to stop channel surfing and read poetry? Have you gone out of your mind? You are going to raise your sons and daughters to be conscientious objectors? Have you gone out of your mind?

For the first 200 years of the Jesus Movement, no one was allowed to wear the uniform of any army. Now we have Bible verses stenciled into the barrel of our weapons. When his disciples suggested a little fire from heaven to teach the enemy a lesson, or to punish the high priest who had him arrested by cutting off his ear, Jesus, his face set toward peace through pacifism, said no, no, no. Have you gone out of your mind? Now we have Mel Gibson, and *Left Behind*, and the late Jerry Falwell proclaiming that “God is pro-war.”

Yes, we have lost our minds. But not in the way Jesus hoped we would. We want Jesus and the Empire too. In this remarkable passage from Luke, we have the twin curses of organized religion: the flamethrowers and the procrastinators. Zapping the enemy, and wanting to have our cake and eat it too. We want to have it instantly and on our terms. Fred Craddock said once that in our zeal for Christ we come to Jesus in a blaze of glory, like coming to the altar and taking a \$1,000 bill out of our pocket and putting it on the table. “Here’s my life, Lord. I’m giving it all.”

But the reality for most of us is that he sends us to the bank and has us cash in the \$1,000 for quarters. We put down 25 cents here, 50 cents there. Listen to the neighbor kid’ trouble instead of saying, ‘Get lost.’ Go to a committee meeting. Show up with your casserole at 363, even if you had to do a lot of chopping, stop at the nursing home instead of driving by. This is real discipleship, 25 cents at a time.

But what matters is not how glorious the act, but how steady and unrelenting is the orientation. Once our faces are set, once our hand is on the plow, we should not look back. Eugene Peterson, author of that marvelous translation of the Bible known as *The Message*, also wrote a book on discipleship, and the title of that book is the heart of this text and this sermon: *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*.

“For freedom Christ has set us free” wrote the apostle Paul. “You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.”

Is this good news? More than that. This is *the* Good News. A servant Christian is the freest person on earth? Have you lost your mind?
One can only hope . . .



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